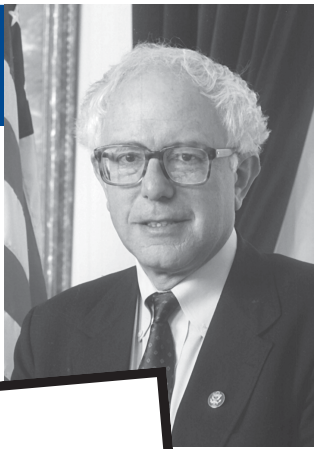




U.S. Representative

Bernie Sanders

Focus on Senior Citizens' Issues



Summer 2002

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Vermont Senior,

I am writing to keep you informed about developments in the nation's capital concerning issues of importance to seniors.

As you may know, I am fighting hard in Congress to make certain that our government gets its priorities right. In the richest nation on earth, no senior citizen should lack access to quality healthcare, affordable prescription drugs, decent housing, necessary transportation or good quality nutrition. We must also do everything we can to make certain that veterans receive the benefits that they were promised.

In that regard, it is distressing that the President and Congressional leaders have borrowed money from the Social Security Trust Fund in order to provide huge tax breaks for the rich, while allocating inadequate funds for Medicare, Medicaid and veterans' needs. That's wrong.

I must also tell you that I am very concerned about the increased talk about "reforming" Social Security. Unfortunately, when officials in Washington talk about "reforming" Social Security, what they really mean is moving toward privatization, cutting benefits or raising the retirement age. Those are ideas that I strongly oppose.

Seniors should know that cuts in Social Security are absolutely unnecessary. Much of the talk we hear about Social Security going "bankrupt" is total nonsense. The truth is that the Social Security Trust Fund has a surplus today of \$1.26 trillion and can pay out all benefits owed to all eligible Americans for the next 36 years. With modest changes, Social Security will have enough funds to take care of our children and grandchildren.

As one of the leaders in Congress in fighting to lower the cost of prescription drugs and establish a prescription drug benefit for seniors under Medicare, I am happy to tell you that some real progress is being made on this issue. It is my hope that, within this session of Congress, strong legislation will be passed that will make certain that every senior in this country has access to affordable medicine.

I also want to take this opportunity to make lower-income Vermont seniors aware of the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). This program provides seniors with a nutritious assortment of food items each month – free of charge. Some 6,000 Vermont seniors are already in the program and, if you're eligible, you should give thought to applying. All seniors should check out the information inside this newsletter to find out if they are eligible to participate.

Finally, I would like to remind everyone that my office is available to help with any problems you are having with Social Security, Medicare, the Veterans Administration, or any other federal program. My staff is also available to answer any questions you may have about government benefits that you may be eligible for. If you have any questions or comments, please call my office at 800-339-9834. Also, please visit my website at www.bernie.house.gov.

Sincerely yours,

Bernie
Bernard Sanders
U.S. Congressman

Social Security: Decades of Success

Of all the federal programs that have been implemented – many of them worthy – none can match the success of Social Security. Since 1935, Social Security has helped to lift America's seniors out of poverty.

Today, Social Security is the centerpiece of most seniors' retirement income. Social Security makes up 66% of the retirement income of the average middle-income retiree and is the sole source of income for 20% of seniors.

Despite Social Security's success, some have suggested that we abandon it. Many of those looking to do away with Social Security claim that as the baby boom generation retires, there will not be enough money to pay everyone their Social Security benefits. This, they say, is the reason we need to "privatize" Social Security, cut benefits, or raise the age at which people can collect it. In my view, these radical changes are unnecessary and would do severe damage to America's seniors.

The truth of the matter is that Social Security is in a very strong financial position and with only minor changes will be able to pay out benefits to everyone for the indefinite future. Currently, the payroll taxes Social Security collects are more than the cost of the benefits it pays out. As a result, the Social Security Trust fund now has assets of \$1.26 trillion. These assets are

expected to grow so that when combined with payroll taxes, Social Security can pay 100% of benefits until 2038 even if we do nothing at all. That's hardly the crisis that the enemies of Social Security would have you believe it is.

In order to make Social Security even stronger, and enable it to pay full

"The truth of the matter is that Social Security is in a very strong financial position and with only minor changes will be able to pay out benefits to everyone for the indefinite future."

benefits for the next 75 years, some minor changes need to be made.

One simple step that we could take is to make sure that everyone pays Social Security payroll taxes fairly. Many people don't know that there's no Social Security tax on earnings above \$84,900. That means someone making \$50,000 a year pays Social Security taxes on all of his or her income and someone making \$1 million pays taxes on less than 10% of his or her income. That's not fair and correcting it would go

along way toward making up the small shortfall that Social Security will face four decades from now.

The alternative to such a proposal is likely to be the privatization scheme or the cut in benefits proposed by the President's Social Security Commission. Under privatization each worker would get to invest for him or herself a portion of the money they would pay into Social Security. That means, of course, your Social Security benefit would be lower. If the money a worker invested didn't do well because, for instance, the stock market was down like it is now, then that worker would face a significant cut over what he or she would have received under the current Social Security system.

There's nothing wrong about investing for one's retirement, but that's no reason to take the "Security" out of Social Security.



Protecting and Improving Medicare for Today's Seniors and Generations to Come

Once again, Medicare and Medicaid are facing unfair and unnecessary cuts. While these programs are critical to the health of America's seniors, that has not stopped them from being attacked over and over again here in Washington.

The most devastating attack was the so-called Balanced Budget Amendment of 1997. That measure, which I strongly opposed, set in motion cuts that would take place in the future. Well, the future is now. Some of the cuts have already taken place with devastating results. Roughly 1/3 of home health care agencies across the country have closed down as a result of the cuts, and seniors have seen an overall decrease in their access to health care. Even more cuts are on the way if Congress doesn't act to stop them.

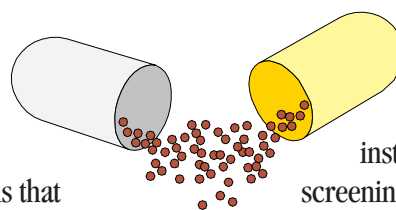
This October, Vermont is scheduled to be hit with over \$14.5 million in health care cuts including over \$5.5 million from home health care and \$9 million from hospitals. There will also be cuts to nursing homes and other health programs. Legislation recently passed in the House would eliminate or substantially reduce many of these scheduled cuts. I will continue to fight to eliminate these cuts permanently. I have sponsored legislation to overturn many of these cuts and am supporting other bills that would undo the rest.

Any cuts in health care services are absolutely unnecessary. The sad truth is

that the money that should have gone to Medicare is being used instead to finance tax cuts targeted to the very wealthy.

When the choice is between preserving and improving Medicare or giving tax breaks to the wealthy, there shouldn't even be a question. Seniors and health care providers deserve better than what the Republican leadership in Congress has been trying to force on them.

In my view, instead of cutting Medicare, we should be expanding the services that Medicare covers. For instance, preventative care screenings, dental care, eyewear and hearing aids should be covered. These are necessities that many seniors cannot afford.



We Need a Real Medicare Prescription Drug Benefit, Not Just More Talk

The American people pay, by far, the highest prices in the world for prescription drugs. Meanwhile, the pharmaceutical industry continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign contributions, lobbying and advertising to make sure that, year after year, they are the most profitable industry in the country.

As bad as the high costs of prescription drugs are for Americans generally, the situation is even worse for seniors. All across America, senior citizens are wondering how they can afford the prescription drugs their doctors prescribe. Tragically, many of them are cutting their doses in half or are not taking them at all. The result is unnecessary suffering and, in some cases, illness and even death.

Despite years of posturing, the Republican-led Congress and the President have yet to offer a serious Medicare prescription drug benefit. They talk a good game, but some of the leading plans would still leave seniors potentially facing huge prescription drug costs. Recently, the House leadership pushed through their so-called "Medicare prescription drug bill." Unfortunately, this bill is extremely weak and will not be of significant benefit to most Vermont seniors. Further, given the importance

of this issue, it was inexcusable for the leadership to prevent debate on other, more serious prescription drug proposals - including one that I strongly supported.

Very briefly, under the Republican proposal the average senior would have to pay about 70% of the cost of his or her medicine, with Medicare funding only about 30%. The numbers vary depending upon the senior's needs but, in general, this is a proposal that would provide little help to most Vermonters. For example, a senior who had an annual drug cost of \$1,000 would pay \$796 out of pocket in premiums, co-payments and deductibles. A senior with a \$3,000 a year need for medicine would pay \$2,296. Further, the House leadership proposal would be administered by private insurance companies, and would not be part of Medicare.

The Medicare Prescription Drug

Benefit bill that I am supporting is simple and straightforward. Premiums cost \$300 per year and there is a \$100 deductible. After that, Medicare pays 80% of the cost and seniors pay 20%. After a senior spends \$2,000 out-of-pocket, the catastrophic benefit kicks in and Medicare picks up all of the remaining costs. For lower-income seniors, Medicare would pay some or all of the premiums – depending on income. This is a strong proposal that would go a very long way in taking the burden of prescription drug costs off the backs of our senior citizens.

As one of the leaders in Congress in the fight to lower the costs of medicine in this country, and to provide a strong prescription drug benefit

under Medicare, I intend to be very active in the fight for a serious and effective piece of legislation that provides American seniors with the protection they deserve.



Important Telephone Numbers For Vermont Seniors

Commodities Supplemental Food Program.....	(800) 214-4648
Internal Revenue Service	(800) 829-4477
Social Security	(800) 772-1213
Vermont Consumer Assistance Helpline	(800) 649-2424
Vermont PATH (Department of Social Welfare Hotline)	(800) 287-0589
<i>(Food stamps, heating assistance and other programs)</i>	
Vermont Senior Helpline	(800) 642-5119
Veterans Benefits Helpline	(800) 827-1000
Veterans Centers: So. Burl	(802) 862-1806
White River Jct.	(800) 649-6603

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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Official Business



M.C.
Pre-Sorted
Standard

If you receive more than one copy of this newsletter, we apologize. Please feel free to pass the extra copy along to an interested friend.

This mailing was prepared, published, and mailed at taxpayer expense.

America's Veterans Deserve Better

Through their service to the nation, our veterans have earned the right to receive health care from the Veterans Administration. In past newsletters and at Congressional Town Meetings, I have actively encouraged veterans in Vermont to participate in the programs that they are entitled to. Now, however, the health care benefits are being withheld from some.

Under a policy announced in May of this year, veterans seeking to enroll in VA health care for the first time will be put on a waiting list until a veteran currently receiving care either moves out of New England or passes away. As a result of this policy, over 8,000 veterans in New England are now waitlisted. And it's not limited to New England. Over 40,000

veterans in Florida are also on waiting lists.

The reason for these waitlists is simple. The federal government is drastically underfunding veterans programs. This is unacceptable. There is no excuse for not providing the resources necessary so that every veteran in this country gets the health care that he or she needs and is entitled to.



How can we help?

My office is ready to help seniors and all Vermonters with any questions, concerns, or problems they may be having with a federal agency or program. We have been able to help many Vermonters with Social Security, Medicare, and the Veterans Administration. We also assist with federal programs that are administered by the state, like the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, fuel assistance, weatherization, and many others.

If you have a problem – even if you are not sure my office can help – please give us a call toll-free at 800-339-9834. You can write my office at 1 Church St., Burlington, VT 05401 or send an email through my website at www.bernie.house.gov.

Free Food for Seniors

No American senior should go hungry or be forced to cut other necessities to buy food. That's why, along with senior nutrition programs such as Meals on Wheels, congregate meal sites, and food stamps, I have worked to bring an important nutrition program to Vermont, the **Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP)**.

CSFP provides a monthly package of free food to lower income seniors, distributed at senior centers, congregate meal sites, senior housing, and other sites. Over 5,000 seniors from all over Vermont have joined the program already, and the target is 10,000.

If you, or anyone you know, may be able to use this service, please call the CSFP Hotline at 1-800-214-4648 or my office at 800-339-9834.

Who is eligible?

- People at least 60 years old, and some women and children who no longer qualify for WIC.
- People who earn up to \$960 per month; a family of two up to \$1294 per month.

What kinds of food are provided?

- | | |
|------------------------------|-------------|
| Canned fruits and vegetables | Fruit juice |
| Peanut butter | Canned meat |
| Evaporated and dry milk | Dried beans |
| Cereals | Cheese |
| Rice and pasta | Tunafish |

How does one enroll?

- Call 1-800-214-4648 to check eligibility or ask any questions.